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Hydrogen BMW production leaves possibilities open for local research

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European automaker BMW is stepping up the production of a car that can run on both hydrogen and conventional gasoline, announcing this week that a limited number of those vehicles will be available in the next one to two years.

"It means that a global leader is striking out toward a hydrogen future and intends to lead the effort," said U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., and co-chairman of the House Hydrogen and Fuel Cell Caucus.

"We'll have to see what it means to Spartanburg in the long term. But anything that's good for the whole company I'm sure benefits the Spartanburg facility. It's just further proof that this technology is not that far away."

While all of BMW's hydrogen research happens overseas -- where the new cars will be produced -- the announcement can at least be seen as a statement of hydrogen as a priority.

Meanwhile, the company has begun moving employees onto Clemson University's International Automotive Research Center campus in Greenville. As of early next year, those employees will be next-door neighbors to graduate students and professors.

A BMW spokeswoman pointed out Wednesday that just because two entities are interested in the same thing -- in this case, hydrogen -- doesn't mean anything would come from that shared interest, at least in the immediate future.

"We've been doing hydrogen research for a decade," Bunny Richardson said. "Does that mean it's possible? Possible. But that's future. Making those two assumptions are that: assumptions."

ICAR, as the Greenville facility is called, is promoted as creating a unique blend of business and academia. The idea is that, among other things, the collaboration can produce the "next generation" of automobile engineers.

BMW has invested more than \$50 million into the project, nearly one-fourth of the total money committed to ICAR so far.

Hydrogen highways

Burning hydrogen creates water vapor as exhaust.

Despite efforts in California and the Northeast United States to develop convenient hydrogen fueling stations, it is not readily available.

The thinking behind releasing a car that can switch between hydrogen and gasoline is that drivers won't be stranded away from a hydrogen fueling station, Reuters reported.

But hydrogen cars on the road increase the demand for such stations, said David Bodde, Clemson's director of innovation and public policy. It also would shed light on how the vehicles hold up in the real world rather than in testing facilities.

"We could learn from it," Bodde said. "The other way to think of ICAR is as a people factory. What we are going to do is put out technically trained people -- people who have a nose for innovation -- who can use technology to create new kinds of products.

"ICAR would want to get involved in this, because you want your people to be on the cutting edge of where the industry is."

Hydrogen-powered vehicles have gradually grown in popularity among automakers during the last several years. Mazda, for instance, has announced that it will begin leasing its own hydrogen vehicles to corporate customers in Japan by the end of this month.

"You hear people say this is a long way off," Inglis said. "Apparently, BMW and Mazda don't think so, seeing as how they're releasing cars. I'm hopeful they'll find a ready market for the cars, and they'll move on to significant production in relatively short order."

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